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Wednesday, Aug. 6, 2008

Leaders tussle over housing aid to employees

Leggett prefers property breaks and fee abatement; Knapp wants 'House Key' program started

by Janel Davis | Staff Writer

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The county's top two elected officials are sparring over plans that would help county employees buy homes where they work.

The County Council last year approved a \$500,000 package that would allow the county to participate in the state's House Keys for Employees program. But County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) says the benefit must be negotiated with employee unions. So, he is crafting a proposal that would give the employees a property tax break. The county's State House delegation would have to approve the plan before submitting it to the General Assembly.

In a statement Monday, Council President Michael J. Knapp called out Leggett for not implementing the program yet. House Keys would contribute to down payments and closing costs for county employees who are also first-time homebuyers buying in the county.

Under the state program, the state matches up to \$5,000, contributed by participating employers - including county governments - to pay some of their employees' home buying expenses. The council approved the money in May 2007.

"It's a pretty straightforward program, that's why I got so frustrated," Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown told The Gazette on Tuesday. "It's much more important now. It's only getting harder and since we know how unaffordable housing is in the county, let's start now."

But Knapp's assessment is not as easy as it sounds, said Leggett spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield.

The council approved the money but was not specific about where to direct the aid, Lacefield said.

"The money was not approved as legislation, therefore, this is a bargainable issue," he said. "You cannot unilaterally take away or give benefits to union employees without bargaining them."

Talks between county officials and fire and police unions yielded little interest in the program, Lacefield.

In his own talks with union officials, Knapp said, three of the county's seven employees unions seemed interested.

"We've already gone through a collective bargaining cycle. Why couldn't we have put this out there?" Knapp asked.

A meeting on the House Keys program was initially scheduled for September with Knapp and housing officials, Lacefield said. That meeting is now uncertain.

In the meantime, Leggett is promoting his own proposal to help county government employees buy homes in the county by giving them a temporary break on property taxes, and transfer and recordation taxes, which are paid when properties are bought and sold. State legislation is

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necessary to makes changes to property tax collections.

Council members seemed lukewarm to Leggett's proposal during a meeting last week.


Regardless of the outcome, the county already offers assistance to homebuyers, and Leggett has increased funding for affordable housing initiatives, Lacefield said.

Of the additional \$500,000 allocated to the county's \$2.4 million housing assistance program, only \$54,000 has been spent.

"And there is no waiting list," Lacefield said. "Nobody has been denied help and there are funds available."


Staff Writer Douglas Tallman contributed to this report.

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